

The Aroostook Band of Micmacs

The Aroostook Band of Micmacs is one of 28 bands of Micmacs in Eastern Canada and New England. The Aroostook Band is the only band in the United States. It was the first foreign power to sign a treaty (7/16/1776) with the newly declared United States of America. After extensive settlement of non-native Americans in Maine and cultural overshadowing of the tribe for over two hundred years, the federal government recognized the Micmacs as an Indian tribe in 1991.

Its main office for administration is located in Presque Isle, Maine in central Aroostook County. The total tribal roll consists of 800 members, most of whom live in Aroostook County, Maine's largest and most northerly county.

The Aroostook Band of Micmacs is governed by the Micmac Tribal Council consisting of a Tribal Chief, Vice-Chief and nine other members.

The Micmacs have no reservation, but they currently possess approximately 400 acres of land in northern Maine; including 176 acre and 80 acre parcels in Caribou, 20 acres in Bridgewater, 100 acres in Littleton, 10 acres in Mount Vernon, 24 acres in Presque Isle (the Bonaire housing development with 69 units) and 6 acres in Connor (with 16 houses). The tribe is also about to acquire 670 acres of land from the U.S. Air Force, Department of Defense, in Limestone. This latter parcel is part of the former Loring Air Force Base and has an active Superfund site contaminated with PCBs, heavy metals, petroleum products and chlorinated compounds.

All current land holdings have been affected by forestry and agricultural activities, resulting in major impacts to the environmental resources on those lands, including severe degradation of some natural habitats. Restoration and maintenance of healthy ecosystems on tribal lands used for agriculture, forestry or natural resource management is extremely important to the tribe for cultural, spiritual and economic concerns.

The Micmac people are very concerned about toxics in natural resources that are used by the tribe for food, medicine and spiritual purposes. Research conducted in Maine has identified mercury, PCB's and pesticides in fish, cadmium in moose and deer livers, and heavy metals and organic compounds in water supplies. Since there has been very little research to identify toxics in other important tribal natural resources, many tribal members are concerned that practicing traditional tribal cultural activities may be endangering their health. The contamination that existed on the Loring land (and any residual pollutants) presents potential health risks to tribal members if the natural resources, plants or animals, are consumed or used as medicines or spiritual substances, because little data exists on plant uptake of the contaminants and on the concentration of the chemicals in animal species found at the site.

In addition to toxics in the natural environment, tribal housing units are contaminated with asbestos and lead-based paint. These are potential health risks to residents and to housing maintenance staff. The Tribe has begun to address these concerns by providing lead and asbestos removal training for staff, conducting lead and asbestos inspections in the houses, and abating the most egregious occurrences of these contaminants. Other environmental health concerns with the housing units are elevated levels of radon and mold and mildew infestation. A program of increased ventilation of the homes was proposed and executed to reduce these problems. However, exposure concerns will continue in the tribal community until all threats from housing contaminants are removed.

The Aroostook Band of Micmacs is one of nine federally recognized tribes in New England and all have developed a partnership with the EPA. The Micmacs are one of seven of these tribes that have worked under EPA since 1995 through EPA's Indian Environmental General Assistance Program. The Micmacs, also, receive EPA environmental development support under Section 104(b)(3) of the Clean Water Act and under Section 103 of the Clean Air Act. EPA grants have enabled the tribe to accomplish environmental assessments on their land, to develop a laboratory for analyzing priority pollutants in water and toxics, to establish an advanced air monitoring station and to educate their people (especially children) regarding environmental health hazards.

In 1998 this tribe entered into a Tribal/EPA Agreement that established the framework for a government-to-government relationship and establish some long-term environmental goals for the tribe. The Micmacs, with other tribes, have also entered into a model MOU with 13 other Federal Agencies for natural resource protection in New England. The Micmacs and other tribes in New England have enjoyed the respect and assistance of the EPA and other federal agencies in preserving and restoring their particular environments. In Maine the state government has challenged tribal sovereignty, its authority to administer its own environment. If Indian tribes lose their right of self-determination, they will not be able to control their natural resources and they will lose their identity and culture. The Aroostook Band of Micmacs wants to continue its precious traditions and care for the land and water and air.